

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Smallpox

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What was smallpox?

Smallpox was a disease caused by the virus (a germ) *Variola*. Smallpox was eliminated from humans in the late 1970's. The last naturally occurring case was in 1977 in Africa. Before a vaccination and eradication campaign finally brought an end to smallpox transmission, the disease was found worldwide.

Is there a risk of getting smallpox today?

Currently, there are only 2 known stocks of *Variola* (smallpox virus), which are held in Atlanta and in Russia. There is a concern that the smallpox virus might exist elsewhere and be used in a harmful way. There is no documented evidence of this existence outside the secure laboratories.

How was smallpox spread?

Smallpox was very contagious (easily caught) and was spread from person to person by infected saliva droplets. Exposure may come from close personal contact (e.g., kissing), airborne spread (e.g., coughing or sneezing), or through direct contact with the smallpox virus.

What were the symptoms of smallpox?

Initial symptoms of smallpox included high fever, fatigue, headache, and backache. A rash (spots), mostly found on the face, arms, and legs, followed in two to three days after the high fever. The spots start out flat but then become pus-filled and begin to crust (scab) in the second week. The scabs separate and fall off in three to four weeks. Smallpox can result in death. Smallpox is not contagious until the beginning of the rash (two to three days after fever starts).

How soon do symptoms appear after exposure?

It usually takes 11 days to 2 weeks (14 days) for initial symptoms to appear.

How is smallpox treated?

There is no specific treatment for smallpox. Patients would be given fluids, medicine to control fever and pain, and antibiotics for other infections that may occur as a result of smallpox.

Is there a smallpox vaccine and should I get one?

There is currently an emergency supply of the smallpox vaccine that could be used to prevent the spread of smallpox should it be released into the environment. In the United States, routine vaccination against smallpox ended in 1972 because the risk of side effects from vaccination was worse than the risk of getting infected. Vaccination of the general public is not recommended at this time.

If I received a smallpox vaccination prior to 1972 am I still immune?

It is unlikely that it would prevent you from getting infected, but it would reduce your chance of dying. The long-term effectiveness of the smallpox vaccine is uncertain and it is generally assumed that most of the United States population is at risk for smallpox.

How is the spread of smallpox stopped after someone comes down with it?

People with suspected or confirmed smallpox need to be isolated because they are capable of spreading the virus. In addition, people who have come into close contact with someone who has smallpox should be vaccinated immediately and closely watched for symptoms of smallpox. At the first sign of any fever after exposure to smallpox or vaccination, a person needs to be isolated until it is clear whether or not they have smallpox. The proper use of vaccine and isolation is the best way to stop the spread of smallpox.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/>
- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under “government”)
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>

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